

Getting Our Priorities Straight: Having it Our Way
FPC, Shreveport: April 3, 2011
Isaiah 58:1-9a

We are continuing this morning in our Lenten series on idolatry. In this time we've considered what it means to be caught up in consuming with the Givens and the Golden family- so well enacted by our youth. Following from that, Pen invited us to wrestle with the place of money in our lives- weighing the relative importance of it with our tendency to put our trust solely in what we have accrued. So now, in our ongoing conversation of things that we place before God- we have come to consider our idolatry in worship.

Wait, what?

Consumerism, greed, and now... worship?

One of these is certainly not like the others.

Worship is supposed to be a time when we re-center and re-turn to God;

Worship is supposed to be an antidote to idolatry in our lives.

When given the task of considering a text for preaching in this series, I will admit that this was not where I intended to go.

So I suppose this is the point I tell you to take this one up with the Spirit. And, I can also assure you that I've received more than a few questioning looks in worship planning meetings since I first brought this text to the table.

Yet, take a moment to consider- laying down our questions and maybe also our skepticism (or at least some)- and it soon becomes evident that even in our practices of worship, and more often than we'd like to admit, our own self-interest comes to the fore.

So it was for the Israelites in the time just post-exile—
when spirits were low,
when numbers were down,
when some divine notice of the chosen community still in turmoil would have been much appreciated.

This is where Isaiah steps in. And this is where our passage picks up this morning.

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast, ***a day acceptable to the Lord?***

Is this not the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your

house; when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, ***Here I am.***

Here we encounter a community that has developed an identity problem- a gap in mission and in practice really, between the actual conduct of the community and the intention of the community as it is expressed in worship.¹

The withering sarcasm of the prophet speaks on behalf of our frustrated God who is at a wits end concerning the community's practices of fasting. Yes, they are doing it and their doing it regularly, but I think they've missed the purpose- as does the prophet. The practice of fasting, though not reserved for Sabbath days only, is interchanged with language that leads us to think in terms of our own Sabbath day- a time set aside when we desire to seek God, to delight in God's ways, and to draw nearer to our Creator. And in fact the prophet refers to specific fast days- set aside to do those things God now mockingly questions, saying, "Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. Westminster Bible Companion, *Isaiah 40-66*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

Obviously, worship is not idolatrous in itself.

Even more clear to us is that worship is not something to be done away with. We know these things for sure. Our esteemed brother of the Reformation, John Calvin, would say that we exist for no other reason *than* to worship God; to praise, to offer ourselves, to give thanksgiving. Worship, even more so than the things we own or the money we have, is something that we cannot- as a people of God- live without. Worship itself, is a non-negotiable.

But the concern is that, when it comes to practices of worship, our approach brings to mind the popular Burger King slogan-

Have it Your Way.

We want to worship, and we know that it is spiritual sustenance—

but it should look a certain way,

challenge us just enough but not too much,

and satisfy us enough to carry us through another week in the world.

Many of those who study the church today have come to the conclusion that we, and by that I mean the mainline church, are enduring our own period of exile. Much like the ancient Israelites in our text,

our spirits are low about what might become of these institutions we hold so dear;

our sheer numbers are down from the heyday of the 60s when worship was packed each Sunday;

and sometimes it feels that in midst of this we are in a one-way conversation with God and getting no feedback.

Our numbers keep shrinking and our anxieties rise.

“Why do we worship, but you do not see?

Why do we spend our energy, but you do not notice?”, we ask along with the Israelites.

So we want to double down our efforts at renewal and church growth, and at the top of our list, alongside church leadership, is Sunday morning worship. To echo Pen’s words from last week, I am certainly not a good example otherwise. When it comes to idolizing practices of worship- pastors are at or near the front of the line. Try sitting in worship sometime with a pastor or seminary student. I am afraid that I will never be able to go to a worship service without critiquing the order, or the language, or the way the preacher was all over the place in her sermon. I think we rank right up there with church musicians, and then of course, Presbyterians in general. Now remember that not only am I a pastor, but the daughter of two church musicians and lifelong Presbyterian. I am hereby implicated.

So as we worry over what to do to help our declining church, the questions come:

Where are all of the young families?

Why did we go long today and what can we cut to make sure we get out on time?
Who's going to tell the youth it's not appropriate to wear shorts to church?
What happened to the creed we used to always use?
Why don't we use more contemporary language?
Why can't we make use of more technology?
What about engaging current events?

Not all of these questions are bad, though the target of some is questionable. And asking questions about how we worship is an important and faithful thing to do. The concern comes when we consider what is motivating those questions.

These questions in particular have been a significant part of the worship wars- a debate most familiar to us as traditional verses contemporary. And no matter where you land or what side you take, these questions come not from the viewpoint of what is pleasing to God, but instead approach worship as a tool for evangelism and recruitment of new members.

Last year about this time, as a part of the Confirmation class, our middle-schoolers gathered here in the Sanctuary (it looked different then) to think about worship. What is it? Why do we do it? Why is it important? One of the ways we introduced the conversation was to imagine worship as drama. There were three categories- Audience, Actor(s), Stage Manager; and there was a listing of familiar roles- congregation, God, pastor/liturgists, and choir. They started out with God as the Stage Manager, the leaders as the Actors and the congregation as the Audience. But thinking on it together some more, they came to different answers-the Actors in worship are the congregation, the Stage Managers are the pastors and liturgists, and most importantly the Audience is God.

I know that there are times when I walk in the door here when I think of myself as Actor and you, the congregation, as Audience. But I know that's not right. It's this mindset that can and often does lead our worship to being more about how and what we do and less about offering ourselves with gratitude to God.

Worship becomes a means to an end-

to entertain,

to feel good,

to make righteous for another week in the world.

In misunderstanding the drama of worship we take out the possibility that in this space we might experience anew the awe and wonder of encountering our very living God. Such encounters move us towards greater faithfulness and away from anxiety; towards more sincere acts of worship and away from rote practice; towards a practice of worship that encompasses our whole lives and away from one hour a week on Sunday morning.

This is just where the problem lies also for the Israelites- misunderstanding the drama of worship. And it's this last point about devotion encompassing our whole lives where they are pushed even further, as are we. This text has a decidedly economic and social component woven directly in relation to practices of fasting and worship.

With the last few verses we find that the other shoe has dropped. Those who fast in Israel with an eye towards God's blessing, but who do not care for others in the community, serve only their own interests and not those of God. Walter Brueggemann observes that for this returning Israelite community,

"The public sign of faithful identity is Sabbath. Sabbath is the alternative to a restless, aggressive, unbridled, acquisitiveness that exploits neighbor for self-gain... The neighbor is not a detraction or an inconvenience, but is the currency through which the community is on offer".²

The practice of worship goes hand in hand with the practice of being disciples. Worship and discipleship are indistinguishable if we do them wholeheartedly.

Wonder with me now— what would it look like for this community if we were to consider these two things-

worship is not done in service of our own interests and anxieties,
AND, worship is not just another thing that makes up our lives, it is not separate from our concerns about the economy, society, politics, or our neighbor.

I know this is nothing new to many of you, but I ask you as I ask myself to gauge how we're doing.

Are our claims of who holds authority over us the same inside this space as outside these walls?

Are our prayers for others made manifest in our ministries during the week?

Do our cries for justice make it past these doors and onto the streets?

Is our recognition of one another as sisters and brothers in Christ the same on Sunday morning and Tuesday afternoon?

Do we expect God in our midst among those we encounter outside these walls just as much as we do among those inside this space?

We do well on some accounts, though like every community we have room for growth- and that is where we are being challenged with these words from Isaiah. There is no room for debate here- worship informs and shapes our whole life. What we know here about our own sinfulness is just as true in here as it is out there. What

² Brueggemann, Walter. *Westminster Bible Companion, Isaiah 40-66*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

we know here about God's grace is just as true in here as it is out there. What we are called to do to care for one another is just as true in here as it is out there.

We are then challenged to look inside our worship at those things to which we cling a bit too tightly, that were we to let go we might allow even more space for encountering the awe and wonder of God in our midst. And challenged to step outside, carrying with us worship that is embodied in our whole lives; worship that changes us and those around us, that opens our eyes to new places where God is already acting in our midst. As we prepare to be nourished at this table, let us give thanks that the One who gathers us here is also the One who sends us out from here to feed and be fed by others. Then we will call, and the Lord will answer, "Here I am".